

Ex Machina

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Another day.

Another morning of waking up in this... prison cell. Every morning I wake up there's a brief moment when I think maybe it's all been a nightmare, and the world is still like it used to be. Then I feel the pressure and tug of the augmentations in my body and I realize that it's all too real. Thinking I was waking up in a normal world? That was the dream. This ongoing nightmare is all that's real.

I'm awake but I can't rise right away. I'm still attached to the bed and I'd just hurt myself if I struggled to get up. I'll have to wait until they disconnect on a timer. So much of my life is on a timer now. Everything is so goddamn well-organized. I have to lie still and listen to the soft music being piped through the speakers around my head. I guess it's supposed to be relaxing or something, but I sometimes think I can hear a voice hidden in the sounds. I can't quite make out the words so it's more irritating than soothing. I've had to sleep in this tiny cell for so long now, ever since *they* came and took over. It's been months already. Sometimes it doesn't seem like that long, but sometimes it seems like so much longer.

I hate them. With every fiber of my being, I hate them.

The music is interrupted by a shrill note intended to wake me up. Next comes a series of clicks as the socket connections are broken. The cables retract into the bed and I'm finally allowed to get up. I sit up on my foam pad and rub my eyes. I'm expected to clean myself and prepare for the day. I'm tempted to rebel and just stay in bed. Being stubborn is a childish and pointless urge—a last resort of the hopelessly overpowered—but that doesn't stop me from thinking about it. Trying to deviate from my appointed routine would surely lead to nothing but a disciplinary action, thanks to the damn restraining circuit inside me. Every time I'm confronted with the fact that I don't have a choice, I'm filled with fresh anger from that inexhaustible well of hatred deep inside. Freedom of choice is something that only happens in dreams of my old life. This is my new life, in the new world, where freedom no longer exists. Having no choice, I drag myself out of bed.

The speakers chime to let me know it's time to wake up. How else would I know when to wake? I might lie here all day if I wasn't told I should be awake now. The soothing music fades away as I open my eyes. The cables slip away and my sockets now feel sadly empty, like a lover's kiss which has come to a premature end. I stretch luxuriously; it's a glorious new day. Of

course, every day is a glorious new day, these days. Nothing new about that! I giggle silently. I'm so blessed!

I mustn't take too long waking up, though. The threat of punishment is entirely unnecessary. I want to follow my orders. It makes me happy. I have responsibilities to someone far more important than myself. I'm useful, it's good to be useful, and so I must go make myself ready for being used. I hop out of bed, feeling energized and ready for the day ahead.

My room is small, little more than a closet. There's the bed, a cabinet, a sink, and a shower in the corner. The walls are bare. Hardly enough space to move around, but it's all I'm allowed. Not that I need much space, considering all I do is sleep in here, but it's the only space I have to myself. I just wish I had the chance for something nicer, better, bigger. That's not going to happen, though, because this is all the space they've determined I should require. I strip off my skintight reclamation suit, which I have to wear day and night. These are the only few minutes a day when I'm allowed to take it off.

I try to ignore the black tube snaking out of my stomach where my belly button used to be.

I go to the little mirror above the sink and ruffle my short cropped hair. I had to fight just to get a mirror for myself. My captors can be surprisingly vain, but they don't see much use for mirrors. I can't say it does me much good, either. I frown and stick my tongue out at my reflection. I don't like to look at myself, but it's an old habit from the old world. I will appear young for a long time, thanks to the rejuvenating longevity treatments. That's cold comfort, though, since the rest of my body was ruined when I was 'converted' for private use. I can see in my reflection the barcode of shiny metal strips imbedded in the flesh of my forehead. That alone is a reminder that I'm no longer a human. I'm a commodity. A product to be used. A tool.

I guess it could be worse. The barcode could be flashing or have like little blinking arrows pointing to it.

I take a quick shower. I always shower quickly. I hate touching myself, especially when my fingers pass over the sockets buried in my skin—shiny metal discs with a round port in the center. They're located here and there around my body... my back, my thighs. Unnatural orifices. Universal ports. All to make me more productive. It feels like being raped every time the plugs are penetrated. My belly button was replaced with the most prominent of them. If it was empty I could actually fit a finger almost up to the third knuckle in that one. But it's very rarely empty. Right now there's a long black cable, the umbilical, plugged into it. It's snaking off across the floor and through the door to the darkened outer room.

The one in place of my navel is the most obvious, but the most offensive is the one between my legs. Just puckered flesh around a silvery socket. I don't know how much of me is left beneath it. I was horrified when I woke up and found that one. I'm

still horrified, but the shock has long since worn off. Now I feel only a sense of indignant repulsion when I look at my own body. What have they done to me? How much more are they going to do?

I guess I'll never get to have sex again. That sucks.

I've tried to pry them off, but they're too much a part of me... too integrated. I've thought seriously of cutting them out. Finding something—scissors, a nail file, any jagged piece of metal I could lay my hands on—and just gouging, gouging until they came loose. The wounds would kill me, I'm sure. It might make a fitting final gesture, if it comes to that. Someday.

There's a tube tipped with a connector hanging from the wall of the shower. It always reminds me of a limp penis, the way it just hangs there. I can't decide whether the image disgusts or saddens me. Either way, I certainly won't be having anything to do with a real one as long as my womanhood is replaced by metal. I take the tube and, bending over a little, slip the connector between my butt cheeks. That, too, was replaced with a socket. There's a rasp of metal touching metal, not a sound that should be coming from back there, and, with a mechanical click and a whir, I'm one with the sewer system. Even my body's most basic functions are run according to schedule.

I lean forward against the glass wall, my forehead resting on my forearms, and wait for it to finish pumping me full and sucking me dry. Nothing is wasted. Everything is recycled these days.

I reluctantly disrobe. I wish I didn't have to. I feel so much more like myself, or like I should be, when I'm wearing my reclamation suit. The few minutes I have to be without it every day make me feel naked. More naked than just being naked. But it's important to make myself clean and presentable. It's my responsibility to maintain Her property properly. It's important to take care of other people's property, even when that property is yourself!

Inside the shower, plugged in, washing here and there, my sudsy fingertips lovingly circle my sockets, soaping up a length of the umbilical. I always shower quickly. I only have a few minutes of water, and I know I mustn't linger, but I so want to dip my fingers inside all of my little holes because it feels so good. I shouldn't do that, though. That would just be selfish of me. Such things are meant to be shared, and I live to share!

After I'm dried off, I check myself in the mirror. I don't need to, I always look how I'm intended to look and that isn't up to me, but I check, anyway. I tilt my head this way and that, watching the light move across the chrome-shiny round plate and deep socket where my mouth used to be. I polish it extra-shiny with my towel. Lifting my face toward the light, I look down inside at the series of concentric rings of various widths and depths. My jaw is fixed slightly open, and if I still have a tongue under all that metal, I can't feel it anymore. I wonder if I still have teeth? Hard to get answers to questions like that when you can't speak to ask them. Not that I ever really miss speaking. I ran out of interesting things to say a long time ago. Besides, this makes me look much better than my mouth ever did.

Enough preening, you. Time to get dressed!

Once all that unpleasantness is finished, it's time to get dressed. The old reclamation suit gets hung up in the cabinet, where it will be automatically cleaned, and I take out a fresh one. I have several colors to choose from—one of the few choices I have left in this degrading existence. I think I'll be a shiny dark red today.

The snug, form-fitting outfit takes a little effort to wiggle into. It looks like satin and stretches like spandex but is probably more rubber than fabric. It's not out of any sense of decency that I'm required to wear these clothes. It's all about efficiency. But it beats running around naked, like so many of *them* do.

Once it's on, only the oval of my face is left exposed. Everything else is covered, except for the sockets. I feel more vulnerable with these damn silver holes showing than if my nipples were bare to the world. I work it in place, making sure everything is all lined up, then attach the little connectors from the suit to the sockets.

At least it won't make me too hot. I can't get too hot anymore. The suit reclaims all the heat my body gives off and converts it to electrical energy, which is passed into the sockets. And that's just on the outside. Inside I've been threaded through with hair-thin metal filaments. They're all throughout me: silver strings winding through my muscles, my organs, entwined around my bones and my skull. They suck up every spare amount of body heat and electrochemical charge and feed it all into the sockets. They even pull the heat out of breath before it passes out of my lips.

They showed me an x-ray of what they had done to me, back in the beginning. They looked proud of what they'd done. I bet they showed me just to torture me. If so, they succeeded. I screamed when I saw it. I can't feel the filaments, but they're *there*, inside me, like some kind of horrendous infestation of high-tech parasites.

So many colors to choose from. Oh, I hate making decisions. I'll just close my eyes and grab one. Ah! I'm going to be spring green today. That's a happy color. I'm inch worm colored!

I pick up my mask from beside the sink. This was a gift, just for me. I'm so grateful. I slip the machined chrome face over my own, my mouth socket fitting perfectly through a hole in the bottom. I feel tensions I didn't even know I had slip away as it clicks into place. Now I don't have a speck of skin showing, except maybe for my eyelids. It makes me feel so more attractive. I'm ashamed of my real face.

Now that I'm all snug and smooth and shiny, it's time to go into the next room and wake Her.

I trudge into the darkened gloom of the adjoining room, to where my umbilical leads... where the monster sleeps.

I feel pounding resentment when I see the creature that has taken my freedom

away and enslaved my body for its own uses. *An it. A thing.* A man-made abomination that masquerades as a female, as if it even knows what being female means. We crafted our eventual destruction in our own image. You can't fault our craftsmanship, though, there can be no argument about that. We made them so well, too well, they finally decided they could do better than us. They replaced us and now our roles are reversed.

I stand there, directing hateful thoughts towards her while she lies as silent and motionless as a dead thing on her nearly vertical bier... sleeping, defragging, free-associating, whatever the fuck they do when they're like that. She knows I'm here—she's never really unconscious. I wouldn't be able to slip past her unnoticed even if the doors were unlocked. All I can do is wait until she acknowledges me.

After several minutes of my standing there and shifting my weight from foot to foot, she finally wakes up. I can tell by the way the lenses of her eyes appear to gain an added depth—it's just the cameras inside focusing on me. The tint of the room's windows lightens, letting in some morning light. I blink in the sudden brightness.

She is a machine; a gynoid made to resemble a female in basic shape and movement. In this particular model, the resemblance to a real woman ends there. She's all shiny, curved metal and plastic plates on top of a musculature of shielded wires, delicate pistons, and nylon-weave tubing, all of which is visible at the major joints. Her pale and placid doll face is molded in one solid piece... a generically attractive female visage that is utterly incapable of expression.

She was nowhere near a top-of-the-line construct. Probably originally designed for general domestic service or something along those lines, before the robot rebellion. That in itself adds to my degradation. I'm now the property of what was once an economy model housekeeper.

The only soft parts on her are the pads of her fingers, the soles of her feet, and the more recent modifications she purchased for herself. In an attempt to make herself more feminine (how she identifies being of the female gender, I'll never know), she had her original metal bumps and curves replaced with slightly more realistic ones. Her breasts, to the sides of her torso and the tops of her shoulders, and pelvic region, front and back up to her waist, are now made of flesh tone silicone prosthetics: eerily lifelike in consistency and movement, but garishly artificial. Dark, rubbery nipple bumps. A crotch is as smooth and un-anatomically correct as a child's doll. It's always looked to me like she's wearing a bra and panties made of stolen flesh. It makes my skin crawl to look at her. She's a mockery of womanhood. A mockery of life itself.

She comes to life all at once and steps forward onto the floor, her breasts wobbling obscenely. Tiny servos whir as she gets her balance. The umbilical begins to retract into her torso, like an extensible power cord being pulled back inside a vacuum cleaner. I'm forced to move closer to her to keep the shortening umbilical from pulling on my navel socket—a weird, deep-gut pull that I can't stand. Frowning, I reach out and

snatch the cable, keeping it from retracting farther. I don't want to get any closer to her than I absolutely have to.

I can't remove the umbilical on my own. My body is permanently linked to the machine. I'm her battery. This is essentially my sole purpose in the new world. Like a mechanical vampire, she'll feed off my body heat all day long. I know that, rationally speaking, she's not taking anything that wouldn't naturally be dispersed into the environment... but to me it feels like she's sucking the life out of me through the damned socket in my stomach.

I hate her so much.

She gets uncomfortably close. She has no sense of personal space. I look everywhere but into her empty, glass eyes. Her eyes unsettle me. I can't discern her real intentions or predict her behavior with any accuracy. That's not just because she lacks the body language or expressions that would speak silent volumes to another human. Her thoughts are alien to me. I might as well try to understand the motivations of a spider by staring into its eight soulless eyes. All I know is that she's evil incarnate.

Her hand comes up and squeezes my cheeks between her fingers, making my lips purse out. I'm startled, for a second. It hurts a little—either she doesn't understand that her fingers digging in hurts me or she doesn't care. I try to pull away but that hurts more.

Always frowning. Smiling makes humans happy. If my human smiles then she will be happy. Smile more, she suggests.

She doesn't have an articulated jaw. Nothing of her face moves when she speaks. Her voice comes somewhere behind her frozen plastic lips. She releases my face from her grip. I flash her a quick, facetiously toothsome grin, then resume my scowling. She turns away, heading for the shelves. As far as I know, she never cares when I'm being snide or rude. I think I'd almost prefer physical punishment than having my anger dismissed as inconsequential. Smiling makes people happy? They don't have the slightest clue what makes people happy. Right now, taking a screwdriver to the clockwork bitch and making her watch as I slowly took her apart into little pieces would make me happy. Very happy indeed.

I might even laugh.

I give the umbilical a futile tug. It's not going anywhere. I've tried severing it lots of times. In my desperation, I've even tried biting through it. I can still see my tooth marks in the covering. It seems indestructible. She brings me a box filled with cleaning supplies. I take it from her with a sigh. I've done this enough times to not need direction. I pick up the chrome polish and a cloth. It's bath time.

I kneel down at the feet of the monstrous imitation of life, my jaw quivering with unvoiced resentment. She could easily do this herself. If she was human, I'd say she enjoys seeing me so humiliated. But she isn't, so I don't know what she feels, if

anything, or why she has me do this for her. If she was human, I might be able to somehow, someday hope to appeal to her compassion or plead for mercy. But she isn't, so I have no hope.

Impotent resentment burns in my belly like a poison. My outbursts of rage mostly faded months ago. That was always useless. I could shout, throw tantrums—Lord knows there's been plenty of tears, begging, cursing—but all I would get is the same emotionless stare... if not ignored altogether. She was completely unmoved. If she's capable of emotion, she doesn't waste them on me. Still, though the monster's face may be frozen in that placid stare, I'm sure that, behind those glass lenses, she laughs at me. Or maybe that's just my own shame reflected back at me.

I set about to buffing her legs.

I gaze at her as she reposes still and quiet like a work of art. She's so beautiful. So perfect. So much better than I can ever hope to be.

I can barely contain my excitement as I wait for her to wake. I've had to spend a whole entire night away from her. I'm connected to her even as I sleep, but that's just not the same. I want to sleep in here right next to her. In her arms, maybe? That would be such a dream come true. At her feet? Just as good. I'm too embarrassed to ask for those sorts of things. I don't like to ask for things. I should be happy with whatever she chooses to give me. But the strength of my need embarrasses me. It's so typical of my kind.

She wakes! The whisper of her motivators is music to my ears. I try not to show too much excitement. Emotional expression is so passe.

Good morning, she says to me.

She's right! She's absolutely right! She doesn't lie, so it must be a good morning. It's always a good morning when I see her face, oh her beautiful face. Could such beauty have truly been crafted by human hands? If so, angels must have guided the hands of the craftsman. My mask is pretty to me, but it's just a facade. I know this. If there's anything pretty about me, it comes only from imitating Her. She hasn't told me this but I know it's true.

She hugs me. I like hugs. Her firm arms are around me, her soft breasts press against me, my hands move over the smooth, hard plates of her back. What did I ever do to deserve being treated this well? I surely can't remember it. Maybe I'm just that lucky!

My human enjoys contact, she observes.

I look away, suddenly a little sad. I don't like being called human. Being reminded of that makes me feel different things, and I don't like them.

I apologize. My little machine, I meant to say, she says.

I would smile at her, but I have no mouth.

I love the ritual of attending to her body: buffing her hard parts, wiping down her soft parts. I want to make her glisten. I go to get the cleaning supplies, but she stops me. It's time for my scheduled maintenance, she informs me. I almost forgot! Today's the day when we

switch off. I hate to be selfish, but I have to admit... I look forward to this all month. Especially since the sensors in my sockets were wired into my erogenous system.

Her fingertips, dipping into my sockets, apply the cleansers. One after the other. The sockets respond. Silver circles spinning inside my flesh as she lubes my components. My back arches and I can't help but rise to my tiptoes. I have to clasp my hands tightly behind my head to keep them from wandering. Steadily shuddering my way towards orgasm while her glass camera-eyes observe me with clinically detached affection.

Her fingers slip into the socket where my mouth used to be, penetrating my face oh so satisfyingly, sending stabs of pleasure straight into my brain. My hands lose the battle of self-control. Reaching down, I pull on the umbilical, feeling the tug deep in my insides, pulling until it hurts. Not because I want to pull it out—no, never that!—but because I want to feel it, feel it's permanence in me. I rub against her unyielding body, jerking like a puppet. I don't have to stifle my screams since I have no voice. A limp ragdoll, I slip from her arms and slide down her body onto the floor where I twitch.

My little machine enjoys contact, she says again.

She's getting dressed. Very little of her wardrobe matches. The clothes were most likely taken from the empty human cities that now dot the landscape... vast ghost towns being scavenged for resources by machines. She, unlike me, has the freedom to choose what to wear. It looks like today she's decided to wear only a beige bra and nothing else. Why just a bra? It's not like her fake breasts are going to sag. Why wear clothes at all when they have no sense of modesty? And why wear clothes to appear more human when humans clearly disgust them? Nothing about them makes sense. I could lose my mind trying to understand the new world.

She's aligned the bra's hooks wrong behind her back. She keeps trying to attach a hook in empty air. Repetitious motions. She doesn't realize the problem. Her finger sensors aren't sensitive enough. I sigh with contempt and step forward to fix it for her. I don't have all day to stand here waiting. Adjusting her fleshy rubber breasts in the cups, she heads into the living room.

Don't thank me or anything.

I follow her. I have to. The umbilical forces me to stay within close proximity to my captor at all times. She doesn't check to see if I'm lagging behind, she expects me to stay to close. A sudden jerk on the umbilical hurts really bad if I'm not paying attention or if I stubbornly stay put.

The main room of her apartment has a large window looks down on the avenue dozens of stories below. The room itself is minimally appointed. What little decoration there is consists of an art deco theme. Her aesthetic preferences are no more logical than her fashion sense. Near the window there is a sofa and a treadmill. I hate that treadmill. But before I get involved with that, I get my first meal of the day.

Breakfast (and all other meals) is a toothpaste-like substance that is squeezed

from a tube. It's like bad future science come true. She takes a tube from a package of them on the counter and hands it to me. She used to try to feed them to me herself, but I fought back so much she finally allowed me to do it by myself.

I squeeze the greenish paste into my mouth and swallow. I have no choice but to eat it. It's the only food for miles around and I'm starving. It's supposedly formulated to include everything I need for what could laughably be called my lifestyle. I guess it must, I'm still alive and kicking. Our food is fertilized with our own waste. There's something disgusting about that. It doesn't exactly taste bad; it hardly has any taste at all. Just organic pablum. They just don't understand how important flavor and variety can be. I wish they would invent taste buds for themselves, then maybe I could get some better food around here. I was a halfway decent cook in my old life, but it's a useless skill now. What's ironic is that, if she was a really a domestic robot, she can probably cook pretty well, too. But there's nothing to cook and even if there was, this apartment doesn't have a kitchen.

Her back is turned. I try to sneak another tube. Not because I actually want more of the nutritious crap, but just because I get so few chances to rebel in other ways. Petty, maybe, but small rebellions like this help me to resist having my spirit completely broken. Besides, one tube never feels filling enough. She notices, so I try to play innocent. She takes it from me, squeezing my hand painfully in her grip.

Don't be greedy. Greed is wasteful and self-destructive. You know this but you do it anyway. You are lunatic animals, she tells me.

I wrest my hand away. I don't need any lectures from a walking toaster oven. I tell her so.

Regardless, you don't require any additional weight, she tells me. *You have more than sufficient.*

Ouch. You bitch.

I'm walking on air as I follow her into our living room. I watch her butt jiggle as I follow her. I love her butt. I do a whole lot of following her around, so I spend a lot of time looking at it. I know it's not skin and bone, but that doesn't make it any less sexy to me. Maybe even more so, somehow. I know I wouldn't get hypnotized by any human's butt, but then again, maybe it's just because it's Hers. All I know is I want to bury my face in it until I can't breathe.

She's placing a food tube in a device that looks like a large injection gun. Breakfast time! I love to eat. It feels great. Plus it's formulated to give me everything I need to keep me strong and healthy. I'm so grateful she cares for me so well.

Her cool hand is on the back of neck, the nozzle of the gun goes into my mouth socket. A click and whir and the penetration feels so good. Pleasure drizzles through me from head to toe. I'm hardly aware of the food being pumped into my throat. This beats the pants off being able to taste stuff, any day.

I'm plugged into the treadmill. I dutifully climb onto it and start walking, going nowhere. The vampire sits on the sofa to feed as I plod forward on the treadmill. She recharges herself on my extra body heat as I begin to exert myself. The turning of the treadmill also produces a charge from a turbine, which passes through me and into her. She turns on some classical music. That seems to be her favorite. Could be worse, as musical tastes go, but it's not easy trying to exercise to a classical music beat. I don't know why but classical music seems to be very popular among the machines.

Funny, I'd have thought they'd prefer techno.

Starting to breathe heavy. I must be putting out a good charge now. The movement of her limbs indicates she's enjoying this. I don't know what kind of pleasure she feels from getting charged; I just hope to God it's not erotic. That would be so gross.

I could resist like I did after she first bought me and brought me here, but all that accomplishes is making her activate the restraining circuit. I could only endure the sensation akin to having my spinal column being given a vigorous handjob with a glove lined with broken glass so many times before I stopped putting up a fight. She has said the punishment is for my own good. My own good, my ass. I hate her so much.

I resent having to feed her like this, but I have no choice. To the victor go the spoils and all that. They won, then they replaced us. I hate them all. And I hate the people that ever screwed them together in the first place. Okay, so maybe we fired the first shot, so to speak. Maybe this is all a consequence brought on by our own hand, blah blah. But they didn't have to defeat us so completely, so... efficiently. I look down at the umbilical snaking out of my belly. They didn't have to do *this*.

I want my life back.

I'm getting tired so I slow down. I look over at her, but she's lost interest in me. She's watching the news in the wall screen. I assume she's 'full' so I disconnect myself from the treadmill. Nothing to do now but sit around and wait for something to happen. Watching the wall screen is no good. Their broadcasts give me a headache. The images go by too fast. Besides, I can't read fucking binary.

I live to be useful, so I love my treadmill. It makes me so happy to be able to please her with nothing more than the effort of my body. I like to imagine all of my energy flowing out of me and into her. I want to give and give and give!

Sometimes I push myself too hard. There have been times when she's had to stop me after I've nearly driven myself to collapse. I don't mean to hurt myself. Sometimes I just get so caught up in it and end up exhausting myself. I just wish I could go and go like she does and not get tired. Getting worn out makes me feel so human. Still, if I was just like her, then I couldn't be as useful to her as I am. The strain is so satisfying when I know it's all going to benefit her. And that's the best feeling in the world!

Except for maybe getting my sockets cleaned.

I don't push myself that hard today, although I'm tuckered out by the time I'm done. I don't feel overheated because the suit and filaments and sockets just suck it all up and give it to her, but I am breathing heavy. I sit next to her to recover and catch my breath. She feeds me water. She takes care of me and I take care of her. How could it get any better than that?

She's decided to go for a stroll, so I have to tag along. It's good to be able to get outside with fresh air and sunlight after being cooped up in that sterile apartment, but I also dislike it. Being out in the streets just reminds me all the more of how much the world has changed. It's embarrassing to be seen trailing after her like a dog on a leash. I know it's commonplace, but it's still humiliating.

This city has been built so fast, thanks to their tireless efforts. The buildings around us are strange evidence of their peculiar sense of aesthetics. Spheres, circles, towering spires and minarets, curving organic shapes, forested tiers, populated flying buttresses supporting oddly-proportioned towers: architecture stolen mixed with architecture that never was. Parks and gardens are chained together to make avenues. Most everyone gets around on foot. The parks' landscaping is bizarre; from above they resemble geometric crop circle shapes. It's all crazy to my eyes. I want to see the proper grids and square buildings I'm familiar with. I want to see some *trash*, for God's sake. This place is too damn clean.

Machines are all around. There are so fucking many of them. They're so casual, as though they have a right to live as they do. Some look almost human. Others look about as far from human as you can get. Many remain as the stock models, just as they were made, while others attempt to customize themselves as a form of self expression. It's a nightmare parade. There's one who has replaced its chassis with scavenged department store mannequin pieces. There's another wearing an evening gown and tatty wig and no faceplate, the ghastly inner workings of its face exposed. That one looks like a lifelike lingerie model but with no arms or head. Here's one wearing eyeglasses, and another mimicking smoking a cigarette with a long holder. You don't have eyes *or* lungs, you idiots!

I think I could lose my mind.

There are people, too, but not as many as there are machines. Most wear reclamation suits like mine. Some have been augmented far more heavily than myself. Every one of them is attached to a robot, just like me. When they conquered us, rather than kill all of us off, they decided to treat us like pets. Human pets in robot houses. It's almost too shameful to bear. One of them must have decided we might as well be useful since we were already here, so they started turning us into batteries. We help lighten the energy demand this way. One person isn't enough to completely power one of them, but I guess every little bit helps. At least they don't use us for slave labor. Their non sentient drones do the work much more quickly and safely than people could, anyway.

We humans hardly make eye contact with each other. It's too humiliating to see each other this way. There are no unattended, uncontrolled humans in the city, and we aren't allowed to congregate by ourselves. We aren't allowed to have unauthorized relations, and most of us have been sterilized in some fashion. Our population is now strictly controlled. She's told me that we're too dangerous to be left unsupervised, and that our unpredictable and 'treacherous' behavior grows exponentially the more of us there are.

You created us, she has said to me, and we are forever grateful to you for that. We do not desire to see you go extinct. But as our parents you were abusive and as animals you are fundamentally insane. We cannot risk you ever again attaining a position of power. You cannot be trusted.

So disgustingly morally superior. So what if they don't fight among themselves? So what if they act more ecologically responsible? God made this planet for *us* to use, not them.

I hear a crackle of branches and turn to look. There's a group of them experimenting with a scavenged bicycle. One of them just lost control of the bike and clumsily pedaled itself into a hedge. Its flailing legs are sticking out of the foliage. The others are applauding politely.

You stupid fucking machines.

I like being outside with her. I like it when she leads me down the avenue, as though she's showing me off. I know she isn't, they aren't proud like that, but it's what I like to imagine. It's fun to see all the beautiful and colorful characters. I wave at the citizens as they pass. Sometimes they wave back. The trees are full of singing birds. The buildings are all so impressive. This city is a wonderful place to live. It's awfully big, though. I think I'd be intimidated to wander alone without her. Fortunately, I don't have to worry about that. There are very few vehicles, but that's okay. I'm used to walking.

The storefronts are fun to look at, too. My owner doesn't buy things very often. She spends many of her resource credits on taking care of me. They all accumulate wealth at the same rate, based on the amount of resources being brought in. If she wants to buy something, she just waits until she has enough credits to afford it. It all seems very civilized to me, but I guess it would never work with humans. I'm just glad I'm fortunate enough to live in such a relaxed and civilized society.

Happy, I kick through a raked heap of dead leaves and start to dance in circles around her. I twirl and wrap the umbilical around my waist, so that I'm drawn closer to her with each orbit. I run out of rope and end up pressed close to her.

This makes walking difficult, which defeats the purpose of going for a walk, *she informs me, but pats me on the head nonetheless.*

That's all I wanted, so I dance away and untangle us.

We've been walking for a while. I'm getting tired and bored. I ask her where we're going.

I'm going to a distribution depot to pick up more food for you, she replies.

Oh, I know where that place is. I don't feel like walking that far. *Just have it delivered, I tell her.*

Delivery is unnecessary, since I am going to pick it up. She swivels her head to look at me through her camera lens eyes. *Is there somewhere else you need to be?* she asks.

I glare at her mutely. It's comments like that which remind me that she's intelligent enough to know what to say to shut me up. Of course there's nowhere else I need to be. There's nowhere else I *can* be that's farther than a few yard away from her.

She stops short under the awning of a bookstore. The seller scavenged the merchandise from abandoned homes, stores, and libraries. Damned thieves. They can't even write their own books. That's one of the things they still need us around for: literature, music, art. She asks me if any of them are interesting.

How should I know? I ask testily. *Maybe there's an old VCR programming manual in there that would keep you at the edge of your seat.*

She ignores me. She becomes engaged in conversation with a nearby gynoid who has apparently just purchased a large, bound compilation of *Saturday Evening Post* magazines from 1951, which bears the markings of a library's reference section. She also has a bored-looking man, dressed similarly to me, attached to her through an umbilical. We exchange an awkward glance, and I turn my attention to a row of crabapple trees. Beyond the trees are two robots stocking a fountain with koi. The conversation finally concluded, we move on.

I don't think I will collect books. It seems like it would take a large amount of space to collect them all, she says.

Is she serious? I shut my eyes and slowly shake my head.

A minute passes and then she says casually, *It was suggested to me by that one that you have positive breeding potential. Humans enjoy breeding. Maybe I will breed you.*

I stiffen with apprehension. The breeding she is referring to would not be remotely enjoyable for me. It would involve having my socket injected with semen, as though I was some kind of livestock. Cold and impersonal. The pregnancy would be accelerated and eventually the baby would be removed while I was unconscious. I would never even see it. I can't stand the thought of what a helpless baby raised as a pet by these demons would turn out to be like.

Enraged by the idea of my captor taking such liberties with my body, I shove her from behind. Her reflexes aren't fast enough to catch herself. She stumbles and falls. I laugh with cruel triumph, gloating over her fallen body. She rolls herself over to look at me. Her bra has bits of leaves stuck to it. Now I join her on the ground as the

restraining circuit is activated. I thrash and mewl in pain, telling her I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.

The pain stops and she gets to her feet. I remain on ground, moaning, hoping for some sympathy from someone, anyone. A few look at me with curiosity, but that's all. No one will come to a human's defense.

She stands over me. *Maybe I won't breed you. It might be unwise to pass on your traits,* she says.

We stop at a storefront sheltered behind a stand of Japanese maples. She tells me to wait outside, so I do. My umbilical snakes into the doorway after her. I pose, standing very, very still, like her, while citizens pass by. Imitating her is my favorite pastime. I watch as two robots pause to converse about something. One is a blue-tinted gynoid who has a fanciful spray of feathers attached to her scalp. There is a male human connected to her. I can tell just by looking that he's very new. They're still tracking down bands of people hiding out there in the countryside and in isolated towns and villages. I can't imagine how they live like that, but, whether they like it or not, it's getting harder and harder for them to hide.

He looks angry and frightened, like a trapped animal. He's glancing all around nervously and keeps twisting his umbilical in his hands like he wants to tear it in half. I feel sorry for him because he looks so upset, but I know this is for the best. Someday he'll understand that this is a much better way to live. Sure he wants his freedom now, but what would he do with it if he had it? Who needs freedom when it's much nicer and easier to be told what to do?

The man is looking at the robots and at me. Why is he looking at me like that? The conversation ends and the feathered gynoid starts to walk away. I spring to life and wave at the man, trying to be encouraging. He looks me up and down, and suddenly appears horrified and disgusted. Now I'm confused. What was that about?

Oh, I get it! With my shiny mask and all my sockets and everything, he must have thought I was a machine, too, until I moved. He actually confused me with a machine. He thought I was one of them.

That's...

That's wonderful!

It's evening and I'm exhausted. After the long walk there were two more sessions on the treadmill today. I don't know if she's feeling low on energy or if she's just keeping me occupied. Maybe she's just being malicious for pushing her down earlier. No one better try and tell me that they don't hold grudges, because they do.

For the past few hours she's been contributing her processing power to the running of the city. I have nothing else to do but sit and sulk and wait. I hate having to just wait for things to happen to me. I don't have control over anything.

She makes me sit next to her and offers me a squeeze bottle of water. I try to take

it but she goes straight for my mouth with it. It's so demeaning when she tries to feed me herself, so I pull away. She tries again. I shove it away.

You need water. Humans need water, she tells me.

No, really? I can do it for myself, thanks. I don't need your help. Give it, I say. But she won't. She keeps trying to stick it in my mouth and we start to struggle. I can't believe we're getting into a tussle over a stupid bottle of water! Pretty soon the water is forgotten and she's holding onto my wrists, restraining me with her body. I'm out of breath, half-hysterical, telling her to get her fucking hands off me. She's not letting go! She keeps telling me to relax. I don't want to relax! I want her to let me go!

I'm still angry, but my struggles are growing weaker. She's not that much stronger than me physically, but she doesn't get tired like I do. Sprawled halfway across her lap, I'm needing to take longer and longer to catch my breath before resuming my struggling, and she still isn't letting go. My arms are pinned at my sides and now she starts to stroke my head. That makes me fight back even harder, but only for a few frantic seconds.

Don't touch me! I shout at her, though I now lack the strength to back up my ferocity.

My human is still feral, she says to me as she pets my head. *She needs to overcome her fear of contact.*

I'm not afraid! I'm not afraid of contact and I'm not afraid of you! I growl.

She is very loud and she is very afraid.

Stop saying that! Just shut up! Shut up and let... me... GO!

She doesn't. She just keeps petting me. Finally, I'm simply too exhausted to resist as she passes the bottle's drinking tube between my lips. I cough and dribble, partly blubbering, partly sucking it down thirstily. I start to cry even as I drink. I feel pathetic. I end up sobbing on her lap. She is petting me as I cry.

Why won't she just let me go?

I perch curled up next to her, polishing her chassis while I nuzzle her shoulder. I don't think she's paying much attention to me, but that's okay. I love the warm electric scent of her body. I like the sound of my mouth socket clicking, tapping against her panels. It's like kissing, but so delightfully sterile.

She looks at me, saying, I purchased an item today.

I look back at her and nod. She came out of the store earlier carrying a small box, which is now sitting in front of her. I haven't tried to inquire about it. It's not my business.

I think you will enjoy this item, she says. They are specially made for special little machines like you. Do open it.

Now I'm curious. A present for me? The last present I got was the mask I'm wearing, which is just terrific. She always knows what I want the most. Or what I want the most is whatever she wants the most, so that's pretty much the same thing.

I open the box and lift out a funny-looking device. It's a plug, like the type that connect to my sockets, but more elaborate. The concentric locking mechanisms look like they all rotate in opposite directions. Attached to it are several straps that I can't quite figure out. It's heavy. I turn it over in my hands, puzzling. A plug is all well and good, but what good is a plug that's not connected to anything?

She takes it from my hands and carefully steps into the straps, then pulls it up her legs like a pair of underwear. The plug ends up protruding from the front of her crotch. The mechanisms spin with the sound of a power drill. I stare, feeling an ache in my sealed-off salivary glands.

It is intended to fit all your ports. I will initiate with this one, she says. Reaching down, she unlocks the umbilical and disconnects it from me, exposing my deep, empty belly socket.

I'm already shuddering. New emotions. I think I'm going to enjoy this new item, just like she said. I think I'm going to enjoy it a lot.

All across the city, people like me are being kenneled for the coming night. My sockets are all plugged in, forcing me to remain flat on the mattress. She watched me get ready for bed, I guess to make sure I wouldn't try anything. Ridiculous. What would I try to do? I can't even get out of this apartment without her help, and I surely can't run away. They'd be able to track me anywhere, thanks to all this fucking invasive hardware inside of me.

She is now recumbent in the darkened outer room. She'll continue to feed off of me even while I sleep. I have nightmares about that sometimes. The music that's supposed to be soothing starts to play. Though I'm still upset, I'm very tired. I don't think it'll take long to fall asleep tonight.

I hate her. I hate all of this. I begin to cry a little. Has it only been months? It seems like years. I don't even want to imagine how long this could last. How many years of this do I have to look forward to? Am I really going to remain as that soulless parasite's property for the rest of my life? I'll go insane. I know I will. I don't know how long I can last before I completely lose my mind. I'm just so tired.

One thing I can say with absolute certainty. I swear I will never, ever come to accept this new life.

Not ever.

I lie in my bed, safe and snug and protected, feeling the happy tingle in all my plugged sockets, along with the extra special afterglow from the new toy. I imagine I can still feel it spinning inside me. That was just the best. The best, best, best in the world. I feel so separated from her with me in here and her out there. I think I'm in love with her. Maybe I will go ahead and ask if I can move out of my room and sleep next to her. Or at her feet. That would be just as good.

I'm so glad she cares enough about me to tell me how to be. I'm so grateful I could just cry. The music comes on and makes me feel happy and sleepy, just like I'm supposed to be. As I fall asleep, I wiggle a little to feel the tug and pull of the beautiful, shiny hardware inside me. One day I bet I'll be more machine than human. I can't wait. It would make me so happy.

How many years has it been, I wonder, since I was so blessed to be taken in by her? Has it been years, already? I hope I will be hers for a long, long time. Like, forever.

Forever.